cracks in pomo: the zine

SUMMER 2023

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"Where the people can sing, the poet can live."

- James Baldwin

If you haven't noticed by now, postmodern culture is cracking. The NYTimes is publishing features on Dimes Square trad Caths. A slew of postliberal candidates and pundits are metastasizing on both the political right and left. And debaucherous queers are creeping out from the woodworks once again, who'd much rather get coked up at a rave or vote red than be featured in the latest HRC ad campaign or be the object of your altruistic allyship.

The naive trust in personal autonomy, rationalism, and the benevolence of the human will has had its moment, and alhamdulillah that moment has passed. Thanks to the spergy musings of figures like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Freud, the foundations that undergirded the edifice of modernity have been ripped out from under us, forcing us to reckon with the extreme polarities that we humans are inevitably caught between: sin and sanctity, nature and artifice, God and the devil, life and death. The delusional aspiration to bourgeois complacency is over…and we are left to choose which transcendent pole to strive toward.

And yet many of us seem to remain trapped in the Weberian iron cage of disenchantment. Though the "supernova effect" (as Charles Taylor might say) of postmodernism affords us a plethora of avenues down which to tread, the haze of debris left by the collapse of modernism makes it difficult for us to find a way out of the neoliberal Western paradigm that–while celebrating diversity and freedom on the surface–leaves us atomized, enslaved, and confused.

Think of this zine as your road map, your guide out of the cage. Perhaps you may not agree with everything you read. Perhaps it may scandalize you (even I, the curator, am scandalized by some of the pieces we are publishing). Perhaps you may want to write a screed against us on Twitter and destroy our chances of future employment (and overall happiness). By all means, go ahead and "do you, gurl"...but I must beg you–don't let your immediate reaction serve as an excuse from confronting the questions implicated in what you're currently

holding in your hands.

"The urban child," claims the high priestess of postmodernity and overall bad b**ch Camille Paglia, "sees the harshness of the street; the rural child witnesses the frightening operations of nature. Both have contact with an eternal reality denied the suburban middle-class child, who is cushioned from risk and fear and who is expected to conform to a code of genteel good manners and repressed body language that has changed startlingly little since the Victorian era." The content of this zine resists the bourgeois logic embodied by suburban life, with its esteem for predictability and security, taste for blandness, hostility to ethnic spice, and bent toward isolation and away from social friction. Nature, art, and our fellow human beings can both provoke us to contemplate eternal beauty and drag us down into an abyss of destruction. Sure, you can cover your eyes. But at a certain point, don't be surprised when something cracks through your fingers.

There's a reason why Dorothy Day, an OG girlboss and one of the greatest to ever crack postmodernity, started her houses of hospitality in cities and farms. Suburbia is by nature inhospitable to human beings–at least to the ones who find themselves incapable of morphing into rootless, faceless automatons. As James Baldwin keenly observed, the poet can only survive where people can sing…that is, where the human heart–with all of its complexity and incoherence, its joys and sorrows–can freely express itself….and tbh I can't remember the last time I heard anyone spontaneously burst out in song in the suburban streets. It's in the urban and rural environments where that which is most poetic in human nature–the capacity to perceive something between the lines of everyday life…to grasp at the mysterious–can be unleashed.

The content in this zine–from the articles and poetry to the art and photography–attempts to look at the full picture of our postmodern moment, snarkily critiquing its pitfalls and highlighting with mirth and gratitude its beauty. We attempt to move past vague and unhelpful platitudes about the relativity of truth and morality, and self-referential constructions of identity and desire. Nor do we advocate for adherence to truth in the abstract or to rigid moral ideals imposed by force. Rather, our hope is to forge a space where that which is most true and beautiful in the cosmos can attract that which is most essential to our nature as human beings, causing our hearts to break out in song and dance.

archetyping at the gym : joe enabnit

The gym is a morally neutral object. Contrary to right wing meme culture, there is nothing inherently moral about a man with a sick physique or a big deadlift. From Zyzz, the 21st century Icarus who flew too close to the s(a)un(a), to the never ending supply of Tren fueled massage parlour patrons on Reddit, the gym has no shortage of bloated up, horny degenerates.

The USPA, the second largest powerlifting federation in America, recently fired many senior officials after reports of sexual harassment and inappropriate photos running rampant at meets. Gloss over Goob_U's Instagram to see hundreds of narcissistic influencers exposed for editing their photos to portray a false image of their physique. Most of these people are already big and strong and ripped, but they still lie in order to even further obscure the reality behind the photo (and the physique)—clearly the gym didn't eliminate their character flaws.

None of this is to say that the gym is immoral or leads to immorality. The gym is a tool, like a hammer. It can be used to commit horrible crimes, or it can be neglected and left to rust. But in between these extremes there is an ordered, Aristotelian Mean by which the gym can be fruitful and fulfilling without creating monsters.

Let us explore four archetypes of the gym. If you have been to a gym, you have seen at least three of them. The individuals you see in real life may be reflected in part or in full in these archetypes, which are platonic and live in the realm of Forms. They are the Iron Addict, the Bougie Biohacker, the Aesthetic Samurai, and the Man's Man.

The Iron Addict is usually a male, often on the autism spectrum, who has retreated to the gym as an escape from the real world. He spends more hours in the gym than he does at home, and might even work at the gym to avoid the solitude of his own living room. His entire life outside the gym is a complete mess, but the gym provides a sense of order within the chaos. He lives or dies by his powerlifting total (a combined poundage of his Squat, Bench Press, and Deadlift). He has a tattoo of Jón Pál Sigmarsson saying "There is no reason to be alive if you can't do deadlift!" He eats 6 meals per day, all the same: meat and rice, meat and rice, meat and rice. Everything else is a waste of stomach space. He was happy to start using anabolic steroids,

because he is “all in” and has no concern for living to old age. Besides, the peptides help him to recover from his torn quad. He snorts cocaine before a set of heavy deadlifts because he read that Benedikt Magnusson did the same. To afford these drugs, and all of the meat, he films “flex shows” for gay men who subscribe to his OnlyFans (he’s not gay, but if he’s honest, it’s nice when someone ‘mires his gains). He can’t sleep at night because of Tren sweats. If you ask the Iron Addict why he lifts weights, he will tell you that he “loves it” and that he “can’t stop” doing it.

Lottocracy Now!
"It is accepted as democratic when public offices are allocated by lot; and as oligarchic when they are filled by election."
Aristotle, Politics
Pre-pre-order the diatribe today!

The Bougie Biohacker has nothing in common with the Iron Addict. His life is perfectly ordered and maximally efficient. He goes to the gym at the same time every day, only a few days a week, for no more than 60 minutes (he would never be late for work). He begins his workout with 15 minutes of LISS (low intensity, steady state) cardio because he read a meta analysis which showed that it improved circulation and productivity throughout the day. He listens to a non-fiction audiobook like “Atomic Habits” during his walk. He follows a science-based training program designed by Jeff Nippard with the optimal amount of training volume (not too much). He has never had an injury at the gym, because he never pushes himself that hard. He is interested in the minimum-effective dose to elicit a training response. His diet consists of healthy, organic vegetables and lean meat. He learned from a video with Dr. Layne Norton that there is no scientific evidence that consuming more than 0.8 grams of protein per pound of body weight is more beneficial for muscle recovery. The Bougie Biohacker is interested in the minimum effective dose in all things, because it makes his schedule more efficient. If you ask him why he lifts weights, he says it is for health and longevity: he intends to live as long as possible. He occasionally posts gym selfies on Instagram to let everyone know that he is an active, fit, productive person. Most of the reactions come from gay men who follow the “gym” hashtags looking for cute guys. The Bougie Biohacker may or not be gay, but regardless, he likes the attention (and definitely doesn’t judge!)

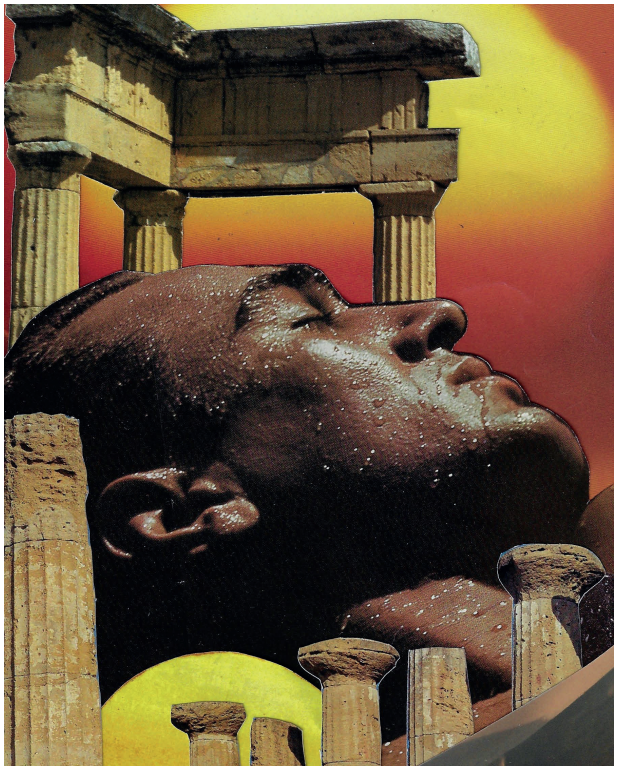
Both of these archetypes are somewhat misguided. Much like Sam Fussel (who wrote the book “Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder”), the Iron Addict clearly has some trauma and identity issues that he should work through with his priest in confession. Like the title character from the film “Dennis” he has a crippling anxiety about failure. Any time he tries something outside the gym, and experiences a minor setback, he retreats to his safe place. He has made the gym into an end in itself–his huge muscles and his awe-inspiring strength serve no purpose other than themselves. At best he experiences some small transcendence in hitting PRs (personal records) and a sense of pride in his physique. But this pride is short lived, because his insecurity immediately invalidates his success- there is always someone bigger, stronger, better. The gym coddles him and gives him some sense of purpose but it is a Sisyphean quest. This Sisyphus is not happy–and is on the verge of a heart attack.

But the Bougie Biohacker is more insidious: his flaw is that his life has no greater purpose. He has transformed “being healthy and alive” into an end in itself, as if simply living as long as

possible and being maximally productive were a worthwhile cause to live. He is a man "without a chest" described by CS Lewis - there is no passion and no higher meaning to anything that he does. While the Iron Addict uses the gym like a bad habit, the Bougie Biohacker uses it in an amoral way, directed toward no real end. For no matter how healthy his routine, he will still die. All of his healthy habits and longevity practices will have been sound and fury, signifying nothing as his bones turn to dust. (Side note: Bougie Biohacker would recommend that the Iron Addict see a licensed therapist who uses science-based methods.)

Let us contrast them with two superior archetypes, beginning with the Aesthetic Samurai. This gym-goer believes that beauty is a moral obligation. He started going to the gym because though he loved beauty, he himself was not beautiful to behold. He doesn't accept this dissonance, because the body and the soul both make up the person. He trains hard, with an emphasis on feeling each individual muscle–he has created an image in his mind of the ideal form of his physique and will do what it takes. He might dabble in performance enhancers, but only just enough–he knows there is such a thing as too much. He listens to hardstyle and hyperpop. The Aesthetic Samurai reads Mishima's "Sun and Steel" between sets. When he reaches his peak form, he posts tastefully composed photos displaying his physique. He's almost certainly gay, but sexual activities are completely out of his mind when he posts these photos–he wants to tap into the beautiful, not be sexy.

The Man's Man goes to the gym because he believes that a man ought to be strong. He knows that being strong will make him better at fulfilling his duties at home and elsewhere. He aspires to intimidate his daughters' future boyfriends and to inspire his sons to be strong men. He only cares about his max bench press or deadlift because he wants to be stronger than his buddy from high school. He doesn't care much about his diet, beyond a few basic rules, because he likes his wife's cooking (and beers on the weekend) too much to eat clean. He listens to dad rock at the gym and looks up to classic bodybuilders like Arnold or Frank Zane (because they "weren't too crazy looking"). He won't use any anabolic steroids because he heard that they "make your balls shrink." The Man's Man has never taken a selfie in his life and does not understand why anyone would do so. He thinks the Iron Addict has no life, the Bougie Biohacker is a pussy, and the Aesthetic Samurai is kinda fruity.

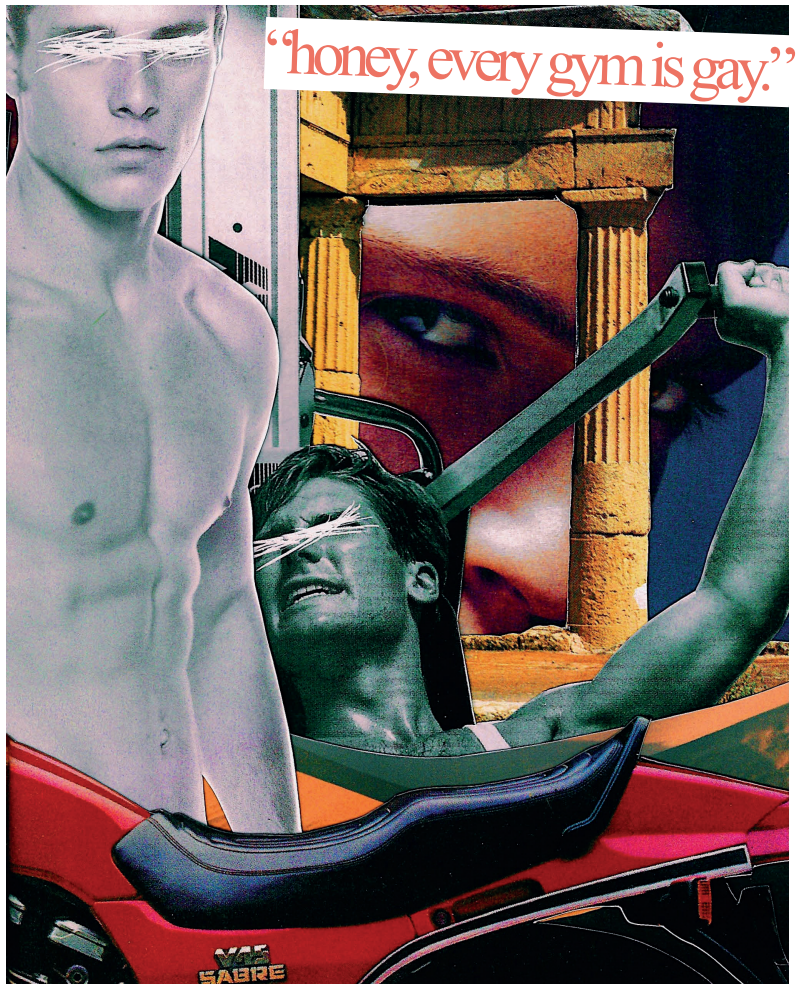


What separates the Samurai and the Man's Man from their counterparts is a higher sense of purpose. The Aesthetic Samurai is a devotee of the True and the Beautiful. He does not lift "for himself" but for a divine entity outside of himself.

He has no illusions about the gym itself fulfilling him, nor about exercise helping him to live forever. He knows that he will die, and he plans to leave behind a beautiful corpse. The Man's Man has a much simpler mindset- he believes that there is a proper way for a man to be, and he wants to walk that proper way. His sense of duty to the ideal man and to the people in his life who need him to be a strong man gives the gym a direct purpose. He uses the gym as a tool to accomplish a goal (and he probably knows how to use a lot of tools).

Remember that these are archetypes. They are "real" in the Platonic sense, but at the same time they describe no "real" person that you or I know (at least not 100% of the time). As a gym owner I have encountered all four types. I know all four of them are inside myself- I have had seasons of being a Gymcel, a science dork, an aesthete, and a threatening dad rock enjoyer. The mean lies somewhere therein.

If this fluff piece has made you anxious about which gym archetype you are, just remember the words of Sam Fussell's first gym partner:



Joe Enabnit is a gym owner, useless degree holder, rural r-word, kaffeost enjoyer, and Iowa supremacist. Twitter:@barbell_saint IG: @saintmichaelbarbell

trippin' on God:

destiny herndon-de la rosa

For the last eight weeks, my grandfather, a devout Christian minister and perhaps the person I love most in this world, has been teetering on the edge of life and death. He was the first person to ever teach me about Jesus, and one of the few who actually loves others like him.

For the first month, we had no clue what was wrong with my "Papa" beyond a hematoma on his right thigh that just wouldn't heal. Eventually, however, a huge fast-growing sarcoma was discovered. A week later, we had to yeet the whole leg, and now I'm happy to announce that he's finally on the road to recovery.

But it's been a whole saga. A long, tedious, grueling, **HEAVILY MEDICATED** saga. And somehow, during all of this, I became the person appointed to ride out his "bad trips" with him.

Some of these drug induced trips are spent with him singing worship music that only he can hear. Others are him trying to recite scriptures from memory, while giving some of the most bizarre and disjointed sermons you've ever heard, but the bad ones, well, the bad ones are really bad. He'll be hallucinating that he's stuck in a lake, being mauled by alligators. And those are the ones I'm the best at helping him navigate.

A few weeks ago, after a particularly nasty imaginary alligator excursion, while sitting at his bedside holding his hand, the following conversation took place as he was coming out of it (and only because I knew he likely wouldn't remember any of it did I admit the following to him)…

> Me: "I'll be happy when we can get you off these crazy drugs. I know you don't like how they make your brain feel."
>
> Papa: nods in agreement
>
> Me: "I understand because, well, I'm really bad at being on drugs too. I mean, I know a lot of people like them, but I just hate feeling out of control of my mind, ya know what I mean?"
>
> Papa: "I do, granddaughter. I understand that completely… but hey, at least we can't say we didn't try!"

A truer statement has never been made. We certainly did try. And now we're both users… and losers. Being bad at drugs must run in the family.

Besides my Papa, I'm pretty sure I'm the only person I know of who can't do drugs right. At least not the supposedly "fun" kind. Most people are either really good at them, or don't do them at all. But not me. I'm bad at them, and yet I've kept trying, never one to be a quitter.

In junior high, I experimented with pot like most teens, and I absolutely hated it. It felt like I was watching my life through a tiny TV screen across the room, and I had almost zero control over

any of my words or actions. It was as if I was "playing" my character in a video game, but I was using a controller an older sibling had unplugged, so I was just pretending to play myself. This would of course then lead to me hyperventilating and assuming I was dead, so I swore off marijuana quite a while ago.*

Then, in my 20's I tried MDMA (a.k.a. Molly/ecstasy), and decided drugs like that were actually just joy gobbling time machines. My theory goes like this: As soon as you take ecstasy, your brain travels to the future and collects up all of the serotonin you were supposed to feel over the coming week. It gobbles it all up and you feel it the full totality of it at once for a few brief awesome hours. And it does feel amazing, don't get me wrong. The only problem is, for the rest of the week you're now totally S.O.L. on joy juice while your body works to refill those happiness silos and rebalance your brain chemistry.

It was at this point that I decided maybe drugs just weren't for me, and I'd pretty much sworn off all narcotics until the end of last year.

That's when I found myself at a party telling a friend how I thought I might finally need anti-anxiety meds like the rest of our generation but how I was really leery of prescription meds because I didn't want to have to be on something forever just to be normal. They recommended pot and I told them how bad I was at altering my mind, especially with THC, and then they suggested trying psilocybin, or "magic mushrooms" as most people know them.

The friend said rather than pulling you OUT of your body, they make you feel more at one with the universe than you could ever imagine. Oh, and the best part - there was no hangover like there was with Molly.

I was intrigued.

However, I was also scared. I mean, I read articles. I've seen the stories about fentanyl deaths, and honestly, feel like kids today can't even really do drugs anymore because clearly the Feds are trying to kill us all for population control or something, so nothing's safe anymore.

Then, a few weeks later, I procured some safe ones.

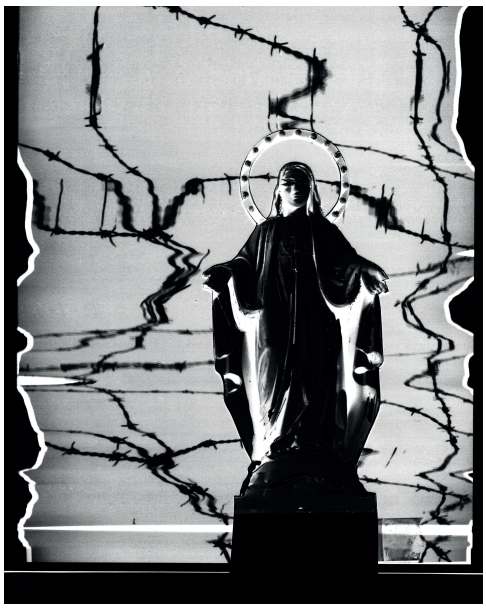
And I waited two full months before trying them.

When I finally did, it was everything my friend had promised. I lit candles and had a deeply spiritual experience. I prayed the rosary, even though I'm not Catholic, and talked to God while watching the support beams of my house breathe for hours. The next day I realized that the dread and anxiety I'd been dealing with for the last few years had decreased substantially. I suddenly understood why they were called "magic." I thought I had found the cheat code to life. I immediately became a mushroom evangelist! If a friend told me they were struggling with anxiety, or depression, or hell, even an ingrown toenail, I knew the cure.

Mushrooms and Mary were my new religion, and that was a good thing I figured. Or, at least a move in the right direction, since I'd gone from Protestantism to agnosticism a few years back (much to my grandfather's disappointment). And at least now I was interacting with a higher power of some sort again, and THAT felt wonderful.

For months, I was doing great. And in hindsight, I probably should've left good enough alone. But I didn't. Of course I didn't. I decided to give psilocybin another go. I mean, it had already done so much for me already, so why stop there? I was on the road to becoming Ram freakin' Dass, and nothing was going to stop my psychedelic spiritual awakening! Or at least so I thought.

Then round 2 happened… and it was hellacious. I'm still trying to work out the PTSD caused by those stupid fungi, which were not fun guys at all. But more on that in a minute.



The reason this became relevant to me at this particular moment in time was because as my grandfather's health was declining, we were all beginning to find our proper roles in helping him. Who would've thought that knowing how crappy it feels to be not fully in control of your mind could actually be a valuable asset to a struggling loved one?

Certainly not me. At least not until the last month.

Up to this point, I'd always just been the comic relief in my family. No one has ever expected more than a silly song and dance from me.

But then, after a particular grueling jaunt to the restroom, wherein my grandfather had used up every bit of energy in his bedridden body, he started throwing up. And the only thing worse than throwing up, is throwing up on drugs. And I was suddenly really glad that I was the one there to help him because I knew that feeling all too well, and all too recently.

In his dazed state, he asked me to hold his tummy, so I gave him a big bear hug while rubbing his back and encouraging him to get it all up. I assured him he was going to feel much better soon. And most importantly to the impaired, I made him feel safe.

My family was watching this all happen in real time on the nanny cam we'd set up in his room, and my mom joked she was going to start calling me "Florence."

But I knew the truth.

None of this came from me being a natural caretaker, because unfortunately, I'm not one. It came solely from a life of making poor chemical choices and that particularly horrific second mushroom trip I'd recently experienced.

During it, I'd been terrified out of my mind, and just needed to be held by my husband for a full 6 hours.

I threw up multiple times that day while tripping. And while it was only 6 earth hours, in my mind I was gone for millions of years, as I worked tirelessly to sew together new fibers of existence at the edges of the universe, in a cold, desolate, Godless wasteland.

Every few minutes I'd ask my husband to take me to the hospital because I was sure I was dying. He'd simply rub my head and reassure me that I was fine, or at least would be soon, and that, no, I hadn't permanently broken my mind.

At one point he tried to read me an article about psilocybin. In it was a line that I'd heard before - "You don't always get the trip you want, but you always get the trip you need."

At the time, I thought this was utter bullshit, and quite honestly, I'm still not completely on board with this way of thinking. Because see, the whole premise assumes that we should trust our stupid brains to begin with… that they know what's ultimately best for us when we hand off all conscious control to the toxic motherboard between our ears. And for me at least, there's not a thing on this planet that I trust LESS than my own brain most days.

After all, that's what led me to experiment with mushrooms in the first place: A brain that was increasingly trying to make me insane. A brain that's resting state is constant existential dread, and that even completely sober operates more like grey matter made up of ADHD on meth; a brain that is full of the Bible (thanks to my grandfather) but is constantly making me question every perceived contradiction as well as the very existence of God, and if there is actually a God out there, it tells me they probably don't like me all that much; a brain that had started making me believe perhaps we're all just highly evolved AI energy sources, creating electricity somewhere in the universe while we gleefully think we're "alive" but are actually just in a "life simulation"… so, yeah, no, no part of me trusts that piece of shit jerk wad.

Like, at all.

And my second trip only confirmed every bit of those reservations. It also reminded me that I truly am fucking terrible at doing drugs and that even the "good ones" are bad. At least for me.

So I thought back to that trip, and I held my Papa. I reassured him. I smoothed out the soft silver hairs on the top of his head and rubbed his belly gently while telling him it would all be over soon. And I continued to do this every time he felt out of his mind for the last month, because I know exactly how terrible he feels, and sadly he doesn't have a say in stopping it anytime soon. He has to keep taking that awful poison. So, the least I can do is be there for him during it.

If you asked me the moral of this story, I would say I don't always (or like ever) get the trip I want, but I did at least get the trip my grandfather needed me to have so I could sit with him in his misery and make him feel a bit better. And if you asked my Papa the moral, I'm sure in all of his pastoral wisdom he would probably just quote a slurred version of Genesis 50:20 from memory… "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done…"

So, like, in other words 'you've effed up a lot in your life, granddaughter, but maybe it's not too late for the God that may or may not like you that much… if he's even up there… to redeem some of it.'

And perhaps this is some of that redemption. Or, perhaps, it's the fact that being in a cold desolate Godless wasteland did show me that I don't want to live in that type of existence, and I really should try to find God now… if only I knew how to.

*Author's note: Full disclosure, even though I said I was done with THC, I did try a dab pen a few years ago, and that shit is straight up cancer medicine. I don't know how kids today do drugs. I took one hit and became a terrified vegetable for an entire afternoon. 0/10 would rec doing cancer meds when you don't have cancer.

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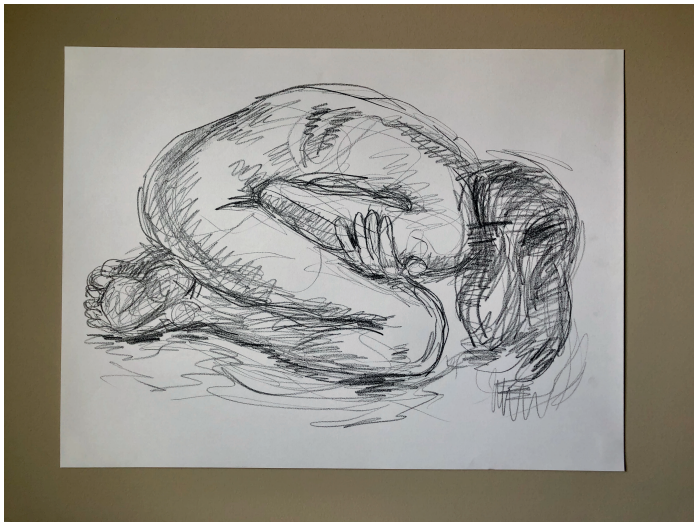

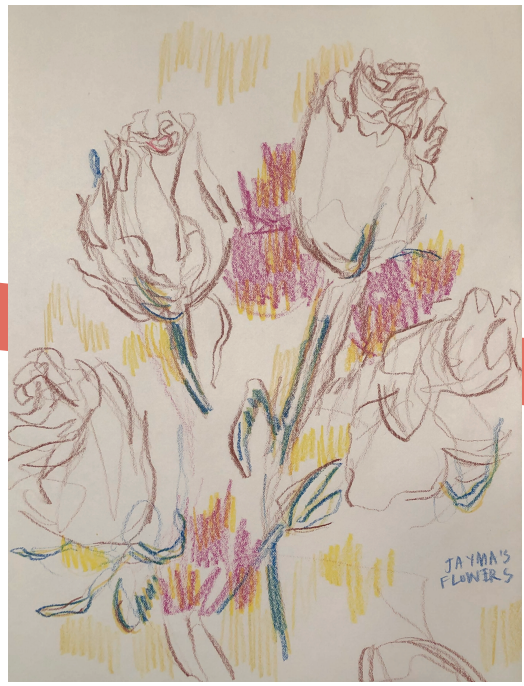

all hail the magic conch show: adam synchula

"Ah, the sea, so fascinating, so wonderful. Here we see Bikini Bottom, teeming with life; home of one of my favorite creatures, Spongebob Squarepants… yes of course he lives in a pineapple, you silly."

Of course: "used to give or emphasize agreement or permission" or "introducing a qualification or admission" or "used to show that what you are saying is obvious or already known."

Now, why would you know that a yellow sea sponge, that sleeps in whitey-tighty underwear with shoes and socks on, lives in a pineapple under the sea? It's just a kid's cartoon! But it's not just a kids' cartoon…it's a show! An emblematic show that used enthusiastic absurdity to hide a prominent theme of existential meaninglessness that would, through its own merit, come to mold the minds of an entire generation of kids who watched it! Ah… the animators used to draw this puppy for years… and this one was in great shape for the first three seasons. But, would you just drop the stupid emblematic label? Have you noticed that almost all kid's cartoons during that time had some hidden meaning underneath, and there's now none of them left? That's because they made it obvious to the adults watching, and the edginess was predicated on the then-prevalent angsty desire for counterculture! And now, you're telling me, Spongebob Squarepants, a show with edge, angst, or graphicness unlike any other, is now the emblematic show of its generation because it used absurdity instead?

CUE BOULDER SMASH

By the end of the nineties there basically existed a few formulas of cartoons: fully realized adult cartoons, fully realized kid's cartoons, and the mysterious blend of the two. Adult cartoons were highly popular, always being fed to the masses in the media as controversial and poisoning the stratosphere of American culture (*The Simpsons, South Park*, etc). The joke being these shows were merely displaying the ridiculousness of American culture with the critical media being so blind to their own turf that they were defending. The kids cartoons were the typical formula, tried and true, with relatable characters struggling through different everyday situations, within the show's palate of aesthetic and genre, and learning a lesson by the end of the episode (*Rugrats, Hey Arnold*, etc). But the mysterious blend of the two created an uncanny hodge-podge of shows that gave kids what they wanted but left adults either confused, conflicted, or in a state of catharsis.

Even though all these mysterious blends of cartoons had a varying degree of adult and kid content in the mix, what was unique about all of them was that they all had this surreal darkness to them, and it was obvious. Kids could always tell something was off, but they couldn't explain why. Ask any of them today about these shows and they'd say "Yo, that show had such a weird vibe at times" or something stupid like that. The darkness was the edginess of taboo and adult content and it was disguised by the surreal animation and art style to blur this content under the guise of "cartoon."

Examples include: Powerpuff Girls' Him (a demonic trans-queer exotic lobster), Dexter's Laboratory's Father complex of sacrificing and betraying his family to stuff his face with delicious muffins, Cow and Chicken's waxed and polished bare-ass Frank-n-Furter sounding devil villain, or Courage the Cowardly Dog's continued use of horror and uncanny storylines and situations. At its apex, the blended cartoons went so far as Ren & Stimpy's full onslaught of sexually suggestive and graphic imagery in every episode, or Rocko's Modern Life's continuous plots of topics like sacrificial cults, prostitution, and overbearing work life. It seemed that all these shows weren't ever really trying to "say" anything as much as they were just trying to push the envelope on what they could get away with. A revolution, of sorts, to the moral foundation of cartoons that are geared toward children.

enter spongebob.

After completing Rocko's Modern Life, as creative director, Stephen Hillenburg felt confident enough to pitch his own show: Spongebob Squarepants. This show would borrow a very similar formula from Rocko (buddy comedy, neighbor relations, older demographic of main characters), but Hillenburg would shift the surreality and darkness of content to a noticeably brighter direction, on the surface.

Instead of pushing boundaries, Hillenburg played within the bounds of non-graphic adult and abstract themes and covered it up with an absurd approach. Basically, Hillenburg was able to get away with telling stories that subconsciously fed children with existential nightmares of: nothing matters; thus indulge, or self-inflict, either way you can't escape the pain of meaninglessness. How? Absurdity. He played that ace of spades every chance he could get, and more often than not, the gamble was always worth it. And like every good joke, the punchline has to have perfect timing. Hillenburg's punchline would hit his audience decades later: the generation that grew up on Spongebob would become Spongebob. To me, that's more "edgy" than anything Ren and Stimpy came up with.

Now, I'm going to stop and assume if you're reading this, like myself, you grew up watching Spongebob Squarepants. Sure, we all knew it was weird, but it wasn't as crazy as some of the

shows previously mentioned above. But looking back, don't you see how much this show predicted? How many times or memes have you seen describing someone you know, or yourself, as Squidward? Youtube videos galore will paint glorious pictures of how we are no longer Spongebob's but Squidwards, and then what's next, Mr Krabs? Will we be like the boomers who grew up, gave up their dreams, and became greedy corporate money machines? Nickelodeon must've been so happy after Hillenburg's initial pitch, thinking "here's something child-like and without potential controversies", but, little would they know, this show would penetrate the next generation and the world to come. This existential absurdity penetrated the cultural zeitgeist by coming out at the perfect time: the turn of the millennium. With the mile markers of Woodstock 99 ending all desire to further this angsty counter-revolution of corporations and traditions meaninglessly held on by boomers, paranoia and irrational frenzy of **Y2K**, Clinton's further deterioration of an already declined trust in previous generations, and a new era of apathetically neutral Americanism) Spongebob would essentially have a free market of imbuing the next generation with its narrative. So… let's see what we got underneath all the surface narrative, and explore what's been itching at millennials and society recently.

Looking back now, Spongebob and Squidward are the easiest to start with in this deep dive. Both of these characters are deeply depressed and are dealing with it in their own way. They both live off a meager paycheck yet have the comfort of affording multi-level homes (most likely due to their parents or a privileged loophole), both are seemingly adults with no love life and no passion that is rewarded past their own vain attempts. It's pretty safe to assume they both experience same sex desires, and because they have been given such a comfy existence besides that fact, they have no desire to rebel or revolt against "the system" like their boomer and even Gen X predecessors.

Spongebob deals with everything in denial and absurdity to its purest form, also with no attachment to any cultural, religious, or societal expectation outside of his parents. In fact, his parents' presence may be the only thing keeping him from fully embracing Patrick. His nervousness seeing them at the talent show, Patrick holding their car back as Spongebob nearly leaves home after his home is destroyed, and the conservativeness of their appearance show a tighter hold on Sponge, not to mention–how did he afford that home? Spongebob makes up his own games and nonsensical traditions because he lives by himself, fearing a return to his family, a complete Peter Pan unable to face reality that he is a grown-ass man, and that it's time to accept the reality that this can't go on forever. Sounds horribly like me, in so many ways.

Squidward is Sponge's foil, still struggling with meaning, but his absurdity comes with his insanity: doing things over and over again, expecting a different result. He never gets better with his art, he's never going to get another job, he'll never admit to himself or his clarinet that he's wrong, and he is perpetually stuck in this samsara of denial until he finds meaning in himself outside of a perceived talent

"KNOW TALENT NO TALENT".

He has to confront himself, his charisms, his attractions, and his place in society, lest he continue downward. Squid needs to put on a pair of pants, swallow a modesty pill, and allow his talent to be a part of the culture of Bikini Bottom rather than waiting for someone completely out of his league to discover him in his little content creation rabbit hole. Sounds horribly like me, in so many ways.

Patrick is the enabler of both of these characters, living next to them in his subsidized rock. He is the clear essence of absurd apathy: nothing matters. He's usually pushing Sponge to break free of his parental mind-constrictions, trying to elope with a connection that just isn't ready yet. I mean, Patrick literally breaks into Sponge's home in the middle of the night and puts on his pants and hides in his closet, playing a "where am I" game. The man wants Sponge, but Sponge isn't as apathetic to everything just yet. Patrick is the most obvious case of negative absurdity… what would he do without his friend? He couldn't even recognize his own parents.

When children leave home, and they waste their money on Starbucks, weed, reddit, chasing after fantasies that will never come, gorging themselves when they do something wrong, watching the same Andrew Huberman videos night after night saying "tomorrow I'm gonna change," completely forgetting what person they were before they left home to live on their own, what other hole do you go down besides one under a rock? Without any meaning in life, it's absurd to think otherwise. The best symbol for this breakdown is Patrick's dream, riding half-happy on a children's ride, unamused by his best friend next to him… and then the ride ends and he does nothing. Sounds horribly like me, in so many ways.

Mr. Krabs is the boomer who just doesn't get why this generation can't keep moving forward like he did, but he doesn't care because he's got them under his sweaty armpits knowing that they need the meager paycheck and are willing to do it because they're too damn lazy to actually make build a career for themselves. What a proud boomer. Plankton's college education doesn't give him happiness but produces him an artificial and conditional lover, the ability to critique other's talents eloquently and without shame, and the idea that seduction is the best means of getting what you want. Sounds about right. And do I even need to get started with Sandy? I think I saw her wearing a Covid face mask, walking to her local Whole Foods.

that's just the characters!

So much of Spongebob's absurdity lies in its plot details. The episode "Pickles" centers around the notion that Sponge's whole identity is reliant on work, and the paranoia of getting one thing wrong, but of course he won't leave this torture chamber because that would require real work. "Tea at the Treedome" explores the absurdity of addiction and pushing beyond your natural capability until your body literally suffocates your soul. "Hall Monitor" is very reminiscent of nonsensical power given to individuals who don't deserve it…wow who knew Sponge was such a pig. "Suds" showcases how anyone can become a doctor, as long as you read enough on the matter, you're an expert! Mr. Krab's Captain Hook adventure in "Arrgh" might be my favorite absurdity: the idea that you can just go out and act on your own fantasies based on a corporate marketing ploy to buy a game. How much time I waste trying to find the treasure, knowing it's not real and I'm just chasing around the procrastination of my own self-improvement, if only just for a little more pleasure! The complete destruction of an entire town, Hiroshima style, in

"Dying for Pie," occurs at the end of the episode and all we can do is laugh! "Grandma's Kisses" hints at this growing trend in openly gay men who have a fantasy-like "high school best friend" relationship with their grandmothers, and post camp videos of them on TikTok, because the natural family hierarchical order has been completely destroyed, and everyone just wants to act like 18 years old with each other. In addition, "Dumped" hints at this growing trend of valuing pets more than people; when is Spongebob gonna get married and have children? "Squid on Strike" hit hard after the summer protests of 2020 moved to September, and by then most people realized, "Oh, wait, some of you are actually serious about completely destroying the entire establishment board by board? No thanks, I did my time." "Club Spongebob" and the "Magic Conch" provides an interesting critique of Quietism, a heresy surrounding an absolute passivity and contemplation in total repose of the spirit, while also presenting an interesting peep into the current trend of people relying solely on what talking heads on the internet tell them to think. "Doin' Time" is one of the cruelest episodes, solely spotlighting a slow descent into madness from Mrs. Puff. This segment is an interesting look into the penal system and an outsider's apathy toward the incarcerated, through excessive YouTube videos exploiting interrogations, security footage, and psychological evaluations. Then, of course, there is the Freemason episode, "Cephalopod Lodge." Outside of Squid's vain searching, this episode is clearly just Nickelodeon flexing their muscles, showing that Dan Schneider has Paramount and CBS and all those other Elite Pizzagaters behind his back, so no squealing, Britney! Whoops, better move on, no one show ~~Kan~~Ye this. Mr Krabs has a mid-life crisis for an entire episode, as only boomers do nowadays.The marketing team tricked kids to watch a "lost episode" with everyone (myself included) thinking it would be a video nasty, but it was just a boring musical episode that no one liked, because even in the future no one likes musicals. And the list could go on, maybe in the next issue?

So what does it all mean? Nothing. No seriously, nothing. Just like our generation now. What does tradition, history, societal construction, religion, family ties, science, natural reason, culture, language, self-improvement, health, any of this stuff mean anymore if it doesn't provide me with immediate and satisfactory pleasure? It's all corrupt anyways, so what's the point? Spongebob Squarepants, while cleverly disguised as a kid's cartoon, gave us all a window into the future of the new millennium, where instead of pushing the boundaries of what we can and can't do, we eliminate the boundaries entirely and say "so what?", while still keeping ourselves from a total anarchical revolution. In fact, you can thank Spongebob Squarepants for not giving us an America *entirely* on fire in 2020, because that's just absurd. You go on working for GrubHub, stay single, watch porn, complain no one has discovered you yet, post your content on Instagram, complain more about others on the first issue of a zine, and do nothing to challenge or uplift the traditions passed on to you…I'm gonna get high and watch reruns of a show from 1999.

Adam Stynchula works in film production and goes by @Wafers3D to his cooler friends.

10 out of 10 die.

I-NEED-GOD.COM

papal encyclicals for gentrifiers: a.w. strouse

The story of how I couldn't really hack it as a labor activist was part of the larger story of how gentrification was turning New York City into a spiritual wasteland.

Back in 2008, I worked I graduated from college and wanted to work in public policy. A professor warned me: "Don't send out your résumé." Instead, he said, "go to events."

So, I took a Greyhound up to Albany to attend a conference.

On the bus, I noticed a young woman with a Sharpie, who was writing "FOOD POLICY" across the top of a brand new, yellow legal pad. During the bus ride, I struggled to come up with the courage to strike up a convo. And evidently, this stranger struggled to come up with ideas for what to write on her new pad (which remained blank for the whole trip).

Moriah Kinberg evidently needed some writing help, and she hired me to work with her at UFCW.

UFCW represented supermarket clerks. In New York City, these workers were mostly Irish, Italian, and Puerto Rican. Of course, many supermarket bosses have tried to undermine their workers, by installing self-check-out robots. And often in New York, unscrupulous employers have hired people without papers, and paid them less than the legal minimum wage. But throughout my time at UFCW, the union—in collaboration with the Department of Labor—repeatedly won large settlements against fancy, gourmet grocery stores that had violated labor laws.

Through college, I had worked at Trader Joe's. I pretended to believe that it was "very Zen" to stock shelves. But for supermarket workers who are unionized, the job means a living wage with decent benefits. Unions are crucial for protecting workers, economically and culturally. With deunionization, the working-class is dissolved, precariatized. Being a unionized worker means being able to retain the jobs, habits, and affects that are characteristic of the working-class.

Mo, whose father had been a Reconstructionist rabbi, told me that a union was kind of like a church or a synagogue: you need to pay dues and attend services; and, in return, you get both the material and spiritual benefits of community. A union keeps alive a spirit. And unionization brings about the self-awareness (the class-consciousness) that's part of any thriving tradition. The de-unionization of New York City has majorly contributed to the city's gentrification, its loss of a collectivist ethics of interpenetrating Catholic faith and left-wing radicalism.

Culturally, at the union, I hardly fit in. Despite my own roots in the working-class of Appalachia, I had been exiled from my family, and I had graduated from a private university. Moreover, I showed up to the union hall wearing my public-policy uniform of Levi's and a white-collared

shirt. My vocabulary, meanwhile, was full of jargon. I thought about struggle in terms of policy, benchmarks, cost/benefit analysis. And I had a limp wrist.

The union hall was profoundly ambivalent about queer identity. Privately, one staffer indicated to me that he was gay and that no one else on staff knew. Another organizer never came out, but I saw him masturbating in the Bloomingdale's restroom. Once, a rep was screaming on the phone, "cocksucker" and "faggot"; but Mo asked him to stop, and he sincerely apologized to me. A few weeks later, I came to the office early and found him butt-naked in his cubicle with a secretary. Despite the closety atmosphere, the union always marched in the Pride Parade and sponsored queer-friendly legislation.

My director was Pat Purcell, a vulgar, Irish-American worker, 400-pounds overweight in a supermarket polo. Through Pat's lobbying, the union favored the red-headed lesbian City Council Speaker, Christine Quinn, in the mayoral elections (mostly as a matter of Irish-American solidarity). When we met at City Hall with a bunch of priss-and-prim policy planners, Pat screamed at them: "You tell that cocksucker mayor that he can pass my bill, or I'm gonna rip him a new asshole!" All of the Yalies wilted.

When, later, all of us in the union marched in the Labor Day Parade, down Fifth Avenue—passed St. Patrick's Cathedral—this same crude bastard then used those same, filthy lips to humbly bow before the Cardinal and kiss his Excellency's ruby ring.

Pat straddled the overlapping cultures of Catholicism and organized labor, interlocking agents of social justice that, for centuries, had protected the dignity of New York's workers against unregulated capitalism. At the union, the foul-mouthed language was just the ungentrified speech of New York's radical Jews and Italian, Irish, and Puerto Rican Catholics. Cursing, they advocated for the same policies that had been put forth more elegantly in the Latin of Papal encyclicals.

The Church has repeatedly taken a stance against unregulated capitalism. In the 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII proposed that labor "is not a mere commodity" because the "worker's human dignity in [labor] must be recognized." Labor, therefore, "cannot be bought and sold like a commodity." Workers have a natural right to a living wage and to form unions. Also, the Church has cautioned against allowing the nation-state to monopolize political power. Against the liberal-puritanism that would erect an over-arching nation-state to regulate life by law, the Church proposes, instead, an anarchic subsidiarity. This is the doctrine that people flourish when, from the bottom-up, they take decisions locally. The Church proposes that people should participate in self-regulating collectives—as in the Middle Ages, before the capitalist nation-state, when politics was a hodge-podge of overlapping structures (autonomous universities, self-regulating workers' guilds, itinerant orders). In the 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, Pope Pius XI proposed a return to this medievalist anarchy, whereby people governed themselves without state interference. Opposing liberal-capitalism, fascism, and communism, the Church has advocated for communication and

cooperativism. Just a few blocks south from where Joey and I lived, on East 1st Street, the offices of the *Catholic Worker* were still open—a relic, testifying to Dorothy Day's faith in Catholic anarchism.

In the history that I am telling, I already mentioned to you that, after World War II, a racist real-estate market enforced segregation and impoverished New York, sending whites out to the suburbs while the inner city was left to burn. And now, here's how my work at UFCW plays into that history. With post-war white-flight, many supermarkets fled the city, too. Grocery-store execs calculated that suburbanites had more cash to spare, and that, outside the city, they could build more profitable stores. Many city neighborhoods were left without access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Urban people of color suffer from catastrophic rates of obesity and diabetes, because of public policies that had disincentivized healthy food access.

Advocacy groups began to lobby the City Council. They demanded policies to promote supermarket development, in order to improve city diets. These incentives came as a package bill, Food Retail Expansion to Support Health ("FRESH"). At UFCW, I worked as a lobbyist and community organizer. With the union, we argued that government aid should only support supermarkets that paid living wages to workers, who were hired from the local community. Our concern was that public assistance should not subsidize expensive gourmet stores that served the rich and abused the poor. Already, snooty, non-union shops were popping up around Gotham. Without labor protections, the FRESH subsidies would exacerbate inequality.

I should have told you about the union hall, how it spatially reflected the dwindling power of labor. Inside, the hall was a dreary maze of beige cubicles and fluorescent lighting, air-conditioned like a meat freezer and blaring Muzak. Outside, the hall was hardly in New York City at all. The union's offices were housed in a personality-free "corporate center" at the extreme end of Queens, one block from Long Island. Most of the reps lived out in the burbs, driving gas-guzzling SUVs leased with union dues. The union's power base tilted towards the suburbs, and supporting FRESH was a last-ditch initiative in the city.

I coordinated with community groups and met with politicians and bureaucrats. Throughout the legislative process, I wrote up and repeated talking-points about good jobs being part of the FRESH program. Meanwhile, I observed the contradictions within the city's gentrifying culture: municipal government was a mash-up of the old and the new New Yorks—a clash between the New York that is a bunch of working-class, immigrant neighborhoods, and the New York that is a globalized capitalist metropolis.

Mayor Bloomberg was a Harvard M.B.A. billionaire with a brain for bureaucracy and biopolitics. The City Council was made up of Huckleberries in cheap suits, who maybe had attended Baruch or the College of Staten Island, and—in the middle of a meeting—they would yawn and ask if me and Mo didn't want to just go get some cheeseburgers? The big-wigs at the union bragged about having these council members "in their pockets."

Council members and community groups immediately supported labor projections. The professional planners, however, demurred. And the mayor's staff flatly objected. Interfering in the market with subsidies was fine as long as it benefited capital.

I could identify with Bloomberg: we were both short, Napoleonic, and convinced of our intellectual superiority. But by the grace of God, I was not filthy rich. Bloomberg, corrupted by power, used his cash to control. When his dream of becoming president was thwarted by Obama, Bloomberg undemocratically overturned the city's term-limit law. A backroom deal allowed him to finagle a third consecutive stint in office. Bloomberg accomplished this dastardly feat by buying out the opposition—spending $245 million of his own money. Bloomberg's secret strategy—not reported by the press, but gossiped about by activists—was to offer huge salaries to opposition leaders, so that they would join Bloomberg's staff.

The corruption ran deep. As FRESH moved through the legislative process, the mayor tried to coopt our community coalition, marginalize the union's demands, and gut the program of labor protections. And the union was all too willing to be coopted. One day when I came into the office, Mo was crying.

Breaking down, Mo told me that she had received, that morning, an urgent phone call from the leader of an African-American environmental organization based in Harlem (WE ACT). Apparently, the mayor's staff had let slip to WE ACT that our boss at the union had made a backroom deal. Our foul-mouthed, ring-kissing, Irish-American good-ol'-boy director had visited City Hall. Without consulting anyone, he had intimated that he and the union would permit the bill to pass—would instruct the City Council to vote *yes*—even if the bill contained *no* labor protections. As a *quid pro quo*, the mayor would arrange for the union to informally participate, later, in the process of doling out subsidies. The members of WE ACT—our friends and allies—were outraged—especially that white men had colluded, lied, and cut people of color out of the democratic process. Mo and I took the day off and ate *pupusas*.

In 2009, when the FRESH bill became law, the new incentive program unwittingly promoted what activists now call "food gentrification." FRESH incentivized 27 new supermarkets throughout New York City. And, through the union's machinations, subsidies mostly went to unionized stores. But, afterwards, disparities in healthy food consumption increased. The gentrifying food retailers brought higher prices, as well as product selections and store-branding that excluded long-term community members. The days of the good ol' boy Catholic cocksuckers were coming to an end.

A.W. Strouse, Ph.D., is the author of Form and Foreskin: Medieval Narratives of Circumcision (Fordham University Press) and Gender Trouble Couplets (punctum). Strouse is currently writing a book about the LBGTQ+ history of Mexico City's subway system. www.awstrouse.com *@putotitlan*

From some based gods (and goddesses (and goddxsses)) …

Salomé (supermodel):
The Holy Bible
the greatest work of literature ever written. New English Translation for clarity and speed, King James Version for the poetry (and committal to the bit). Don't skip Isaiah, Ecclesiastes, Matthew's Gospel, or St Paul's First Epistle to the Romans.

Matthew J. Donovan (*Neoliberal Hell* podcast)
Ponder a career as a Duck Herding Influencer
earn from patrons like the Chinese Communist Party to cultivate militant duck armies for rural expansion and locust warfare, or embrace your inner ornithology futurist, reshaping animal hierarchies and instigating avian upheavals in preparation for a potential post-human era.

Glenn Belverio (of *Glennda and Camille do Downtown* fame):
Reruns of Norman Lear's early 1970s TV series "All in the Family"
it's the only sit-com in history that successfully tackled social and political issues with accessible humor. Famous for lampooning the far right via Archie Bunker, it also skewered liberal pieties and hypocrisy.

Armin Rosen (writer for the *Tablet*):
Journey to Nowhere, Shiva Naipaul
it turns out Sir Vidia was only the second-most problematic Naipaul—problematic if you're an idiot, that is—and also that this book's subject, the 1978 Jonestown massacre, is the single event that most fully captures the delusions and pretensions of the entire Boomer generation, which are of course being inflicted on us right up to this very moment. Shiva died at the age of 40 in 1985, denying him the chance to reach anything approaching the fame of his Nobel-winning older brother. But he wrote a lost masterpiece crying out for rediscovery, the humblingly rare nonfiction work where reporting and polemic combine into something approaching prophecy.

Nick (*Thot Topics* pod):
Cobrah
it's insane to me that this woman is not bigger than she is, especially among gay guys who will accept any club music slop above a certain BPM. I think we're really starved for musicians who don't have an agenda beyond making the most fun music possible and Cobrah really has a laser focus on that front. "Wet" is an instant party starter and "Debut" is SOOO nasty. If you're ready to bring back bass that shakes the fucking room and breaks headphones and makes people make bad choices then you need to get on this train while there's still time.

Cris (*Thot Topics* pod):

Death Parade

if you are ever considering starting to watch anime, I HIGHLY recommend starting with Death Parade. It's a great showcase of world building, great writing, memorable characters, and an overall incredibly emotional experience. I genuinely navigated life in a different way after watching this show and it REALLY sold me on anime overall.

Chris Arnade (author of *Dignity*):

Charles Dickens (almost any of his books, but especially Great Expectations, Our Mutual Friends, Nicholas Nickleby)

Dickens gets typecast as a political writer, or a social justice writer, when he's so much more than that. He's the classic writer on the human condition, which while it includes issues of class, is more about how we go through life, and how our array of experiences defines both who we are, and what it means to be alive. His books, consequently, are jammed with an array of characters, and with lots of humor. Because life, while often tragic, is also very funny.

Simoneweilfooddiary (angelologist):

'Good food, good eating, is all about blood and organs, cruelty and decay.' — Anthony Bourdain oysters, rare steak, carbonara (guanciale, pecorino romano, egg yolks) and cacio e pepe, morning, espresso and cigarette, pastéis de nata in the sun, Basque cheesecake, Coca-Cola in a glass bottle , strawberries, beef liver (by itself or add to chilli w dark chocolate and espresso), carrots roasted in honey, chocolate milk, freshly-squeezed orange juice, bone broth, lobster, French toast, coffee with sugar (throughout day), lamb neck (stewing; serve with cheese), scallops, bone marrow, game (in season), lemonade, raw milk, Provençal fish soup (on Fridays), cherries, steak tartare, clotted cream, jam, unpasteurised cheese, salami and hams, blackberries, plums and greengages, salted butter

hot list: how to keep your summer spicy

FILMS:

Do The Right Thing

bc interracial relations are more complex than what washed up white boomers with atrocious hairdos like Robin D'Angelo will tell you

Anything by Fellini

here for the Jungian archetyping and Freudian dreamscapes

Some things by Almodovar

the guy is a total creep (and probably an MK Ultra pawn) but carries on the Spanish tradition of fetishizing blood, earth, vengeance, neurosis, and sexual obsession…the closest we're ever going to get to a Lorca or Teresa of Avila in our life time (Netflix's Elite comes in at a close second)

Fresa y Chocolate

bc love is certainly not love, and Quentin Crisp was right the whole time…also we are here for the combo of hysteria and religious paraphernalia

BOOKS:

The World Beyond Your Head, Matthew B. Crawford

will literally blow your mind (by forcing you to recognize that there is a world outside of it)

The Novelist, Jordan Castro

the least cringe takedown of wokeness yet; Ben Shapiro, take notes

Literally anything by JK Huysmans

especially for all you aspy trad Caths out there

The Duty of Delight, Dorothy Day

get the unabridged one…carrying it around will prove both a spiritual and physical workout

An Index of Self-Destructive Acts, Christopher Beha

the guy is a genius, nuff said

Mariette in Ecstasy, Ron Hansen

like My Year of Rest and Relaxation but for the trad dolls and e-girlies

MUSIC:

boycott streaming, listen to the radio

it's the greatest antidote to neoliberal atomization and idolatry of personal "choice"

LIFESTYLE:

Ethnic celebrations

if you're thirsting for more than elitist technocratized versions of diversity, check out one of the many saint feasts (San Gennaro, St. Gerard, St. Paulinus, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, El Señor de los Milagros), parades down 5th Avenue (PR, DR, etc), and the famous Iberian, Brazilian, and Ecuadorian fests in Newark, NJ's Ironbound neighborhood.

Subversive LARPing at cafes

bring out your inner performance artist and LARP as a subversive scholar by holding up your copy of Zizek or Houellebecq for all to see (note: you don't actually have to read it) at Manhattan's premier subversive cafes like Caffe Reggio's or the Hungarian Pastry Shop. Extra points if someone actually comments on the book you're "reading."

Do a mazel

signaling your moral virtue on the internet can be quite satisfying. But actually getting out of bed to perform a charitable work has been known to revive not only one's ego, but also one's soul. Try going down to the Catholic Worker's Maryhouse or St. Joseph House on the LES to serve the hungry.

on the "fukú":
jacob anthony amaro

If you've ever read past the first page of Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, then you're already familiar with the term "fukú." If not, here's a refresher: it's a curse that originated in West Africa and was transported to the Caribbean via slave ships, sustained and vitalized by the wails of captives aboard. As slavery spread throughout the New World, so too did the fukú, and it wreaked havoc on people's lives across generations.

In short, the fukú is a curse—one that follows you and dictates your life.

And the fukú, without a doubt, or some variation of it, is why I'm a gay man living in a Mexican and Catholic household. Fukú is why I have always struggled with my weight and image. Fukú is why I only fall for straight men. I can go on and on. The point is this: Fukú has followed me around most of my life, and it will always be there, watching…waiting.

And I'm okay with that.

I'm okay with it because it means I know the truth…the one you're supposed to spend your entire life figuring out. The reason why life is hard. All that's left for me to do, as a result, is live out my life—working, eating, sleeping, laughing, crying—until the fukú takes me.

Better that than to follow in the footsteps of the members of my generation. The ones who tell you to just "do you." The ones who think they own their lives, who use psychology and the stars to explain everything…but who also stay up at night wondering whether they believe in what they preach. Fuck that. It's much easier when the fukú is at the center of the universe.

There always has to be something bigger than us at the center. Otherwise, life is pointless. For many, it's a God. A God with many names. Allah. Yahweh. Christ. For some, it's many gods. For others, it's science.

Today many of us prefer to put ourselves at the center. That's why the world is ending. Someone, somewhere once told me that we were made from ashes and that, when all is said and done, to ashes we'll return. And it's true.

It's a shame hardly anyone will read this and believe it. But perhaps it's better that way. That's the only way the world can work, after all. There are those who know and those who are clueless, and they balance each other out.

In any case, at least now you know.

Jacob is a senior studying Journalism at Rutgers University. A Mexican-American, he requests you never order from Taco Bell in his presence. @j.amar0

shriek of the devil: gays and satan: brennan vickery

The gays are at it again. As the culture war wages on and perceived morality pits itself against perceived morality, religion is reiterated to emotionally stoke the masses. Madonna knew this. So did Fellini. Sinéad O'Connor. Nicki Minaj.

Sam Smith's performance at this year's Grammys in a red devil suit (seemingly purchased at a nearby Party City), Lil Nas X's satanic lap dance in the video "Montero" released alongside a satanic Nike shoe collab, and don't forget those circuit party flyers advertising big glitter-ball get downs called "Sinsation" and so forth, all attempt to transgress the western Judeo-Christian-heteronormative-banal through-line.

It makes sense that gay men would align themselves aesthetically with the immortal enemy of a stern church which has probably been an incredibly influential entity of their polarization and trauma. OK, I get it. Fucking Satan is really saying "fuck the church." But the closer lean-in reveals a particular division between God and church and so just where resentment and one's trauma-blame falls is in the eye of the homosexual beholder. God, an entity not considering its/their/his/her individual identity, is a representation of love to most. The church, on the other hand, with its liturgical and hierarchical political sphere draped in robes and tab collars, is for many the oppressive master.

Smith's frenetic performance at the Grammy's had nothing to do with Christianity authentically but rather it used the inverse of salvation to provoke controversy (for those Christians left in the US), and in media, forcing controversy is about getting press and getting press is about stoking relevance and relevance is a commodity turned into cold hard cash. And the love of that ain't nothing but evil. The same formula was employed for Nas X's videos. Yes, you can make the artist pregnant and give him ass-naked background dancers, but the real assault is the presence of Satan himself, not all that "satanic" ritual. It's the ownership and artful crafting around the biblical abomination that empowers the homosexual to move beyond the label and form. Dare I say, taking hold of their own narrative.

But in this, these gay artists consider religion more than ever. They resist the suffocating moralistic indoctrination of religion, only to be held prisoner to the industry and slave to the public. In a state of secularism, they still find the use of Christian imagery to be poignant and use it as their antithesis; the oppressor they've moved on from. It seems they waste their expression and aesthetic on something that has been most oppressive to them. They elongate its pervasive grip by constantly referencing it. Forgiveness is necessary for gays to transcend their trauma. For anyone to move past their trauma. Like our tenuous relationships with our parents, the church can both guide you and suppress you. You can hate it/them but you can never escape the influence so instead, you forgive them, and therein lies emotional and spiritual freedom. Even from the church. Perhaps it is cathartic to impersonate the satanic entity that defies the heavenly narcissistic oppressor, but in the realm of fame and pop culture, the intent seems more

surface and insidious than cathartic. It seems orchestrated to achieve, if nothing else, a grander profile.

Lana Del Rey's new album features a snippet of a Judah Smith sermon in an interlude. Some Lana fans were confused by the insertion of Smith's sermon, being a pastor who has pronounced anti-gay views, however many of Lana's fans are gay men who seem to have no problem with the track or can easily overlook it. Or maybe are even moved by it. Sure, maybe they've separated the artist from the art (which seems impossible to do with Lana), or maybe they've intercepted their trauma and transcended it by forgiving the church. With such a modern-day focus on one's trauma, it is hard to imagine an evolution of life beyond its influence. Lana is not a homophobe for including Judah Smith's sermon. She is wrestling with influence, ideas, transformations, and transcendence. In other words, she is an artist.

It is possible that moralistic church communities hate themselves and have passed on this learned behavior to its covert homosexual constituents. Never doing or being exactly what you want. Their latent internalized self homophobia flaring up in contentious romantic relationships or on the insipid American political battleground. Maybe in the form of benign "activism". I won't even begin to dive into the church's covert sexual exploits. Christianity is now beholden to the society it helped to shape in the West, even if its influence is increasingly irrelevant in that society now. Conversely, gays have started to prosper in that society in the way that any rebellious freedom fighter might. One thing that gays and churches are good at is hiding certain truths in performance. The drag pageantry of both of these entities retains a certain ritual that leaves little room for questioning their fundamental worldly positions without being labeled "bigots" or "weirdos".

It is senseless and fruitless to victim blame, but I am curious if the webs of trauma or the fumes of infantilization have a statute of limitations. In our hyper-individualized society, the individual may be called upon by the powers that be or even just the people around them, to eventually take responsibility for their behavior despite the horrors of the past. I'm curious to see how that idea would land with the performance of a current pop cultural figure. Instead of commenting on one's oppressor, especially by embodying the enemy of them, what if one abandoned the whole gospel altogether?

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where did all the ties go?: nicholas adubato

My introduction to opera occurred early in my life; I was sitting on the floor of my grandmother's house on a Saturday morning, which was typical for my family, and my grandmother, who is exactly as dramatic as all Italian grandmothers are, was crying her eyes out while Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* blasted from her ancient, dust-covered speakers. I recall my grandmother describing the story of Madame Butterfly, explaining how her lover had returned from war with a new wife, which caused suffering and shame on a level to where she was forced to commit seppuku, all the while my grandmother was reenacting the suicide itself, pretending to disembowel herself with a plastic knife.

The whole scene, and the subsequent remark by my grandmother, calling Butterfly's suicide "beautiful," put me off to opera for what was essentially all my adolescent years. But despite this rather traumatic event, I have come around to Puccini and opera as a whole in my college years. I recently had the opportunity to finally see an opera live for the first time through one of my college classes. As fate would have it, I saw Puccini's *La Bohème* at the Metropolitan Opera.

The night was as expected for late April: rainy and somewhat cold, but not bone chillingly so. The rain was especially frustrating to me, as I just got my Brooks Brother's blazer dry cleaned the previous week… but I suppose that's my punishment for choosing to live in New York City. Events like these, whether it's the opera, or a formal, or even the dreaded job interview, events where you need to get "dressed-up" are ones I look forward to with great anticipation. Having gone to Catholic school and dressing like a cast-member of Dead Poets Society every day of my life for a few years has instilled in me a liking for preppy attire and being my most presentable when afforded the opportunity. In the modern-day university, or really in modern life in general, these opportunities are few and far-between; conceptions of "formal" dress, or even formal attitudes have morphed significantly over the last sixty years or so. The opera, before actually having experienced it, seemed to me not only the perfect opportunity to put on a tie and act as if I were a member of high-society for the evening, but to be immersed in the pageantry of such a night and fleeting ideals of what is "formal."

Upon walking from my favorite American-fare restaurant situated conveniently across the street from Lincoln Center, I could feel the disappointment mounting within me. Sneakers, t-shirts under blazers, not a tie for miles, and so much damn denim. I tried to brush it off–it was Monday night after all and the weather was not doing anyone any favors. Why trot out your finest apparel when the air was a perpetual mist? I also realize I sound like a keyboard warrior reactionary type, harping on stuff like "where did all the REAL men go?" but I couldn't help but feel something was *off* walking into the Met. Most of the

women seemed to be dressed in their best… I guess? I admittedly have a raging case of "male-brain" when it comes to these things, and the eternal image of femininity I have is of my mother who is rarely seen outside of jeans and a fashionable shoe, so dresses and floor-length gowns are not exactly something I'm privy to.

The Met itself was its usual baroque self; golden accents abound and the marvelous red velvet carpeting which engulfed everything as far as the eye could see. I got on the elevator to meet my fellow classmates in the family circle section, which I quickly found out was so dizzyingly high up the ticket should've come with a complimentary oxygen mask and a pack of Dramamine. Truthfully, it really wasn't that high up, my eyes are truly that of a bat's and I'm equally as dramatic as my grandmother, I really was just happy to be there, and it was fun to imagine the lives of the New York City elite down-below, with their sparkling water and such.

The show got underway, and like my grandmother, I was almost immediately in tears at the first aria. Looking around, it seemed like I was far more engaged than some of the others around me; a boy dressed in jeans and a flannel had fallen asleep, another girl had her pocketbook situated in her lap with her phone hidden within the bag, and she was scrolling like her life depended on it. It was nice to know these opera terrorists weren't in my class, but it still filled me with a quiet rage inside.

The first intermission had come not a minute too soon, as seems to be the case with opera, I made my way to the concessions, and I think I almost dropped dead on the spot. $24 for a champagne flute, $8 espresso, $6 Toblerone, $6 water, it was almost too much for me to take. Now on a high and mighty hunger strike, I returned to my seat, still fuming at what I just saw and the copious amounts of denim, and questioned if this was truly what the opera was. Were exorbitant prices, fancy carpets, and an exclusive dining club down below the true embodiment of what the opera was all about? Surely not. It couldn't be. The show on stage, which was about bohemian society and suffering as a poor artist, seemed to be making fun of exactly the nonsense going on in the crowd. The irony was too much for even me to take. There was no shortage of pageantry on stage; the performers were everything I could have imagined and more. By the end, partially due to my boycott of the bottled water prices, I had no tears left to cry and it was time to return to my now–in comparison to the beauty I had just witnessed–boring and exceedingly dull life in the Bronx.

It wasn't until I got back to my apartment and looked across at my neighbor's shrine to the Virgin Mary displayed on her porch that I realized something which consoled my angry soul. The opera isn't meant for us. It isn't meant for this bland American postmodern culture taken over by the Protestant dismissal of aestheticism. Opera can only be understood with magical thinking, which isn't inherent to our culture. Opera is completely surreal and melodramatic; nowhere in life does someone fall hopelessly in love in a matter of minutes, and further, nowhere are people singing constantly. To understand opera is to accept the absurdity of the whole thing and embrace it with the degree of separation from reality it requires.

Looking out at Our Lady's tears and bleeding heart it became clear to me that there was a reason my grandmother so loved Puccini and viewed Madame Butterfly's death as beautiful; opera aspires to something divine, something metaphysical we can't fully understand on earth, but it is something greater than us. To the American WASP hegemony, who urges us to only aspire to utility and maximizing efficiency, such frivolous things like a decorative tie are useless. Our modern life is not conducive to understanding and appreciating the beauty of the opera and its inherent decadence.In my grandmother's eyes, Butterfly's death, as would be the case with *La Bohème's* Mimi, was her willingly submitting into the world beyond our own. And my grandmother, with all of her Italian Catholic bones, surely envied her on some level. Death, according to modern modes of thought, is the perpetual monkey on your back, something always to run from. The realm of opera, on the other hand, in all of its beauty and unreality, completely subverts this modern aversion to the inevitable fact that we all will die.

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martyrs of beauty: stanley bast

"Art today? [...] Art today is spelled with an f."

– William Gaddis, *The Recognitions.*

The golden age of content is disastrous for art. From this position, it's easy to slip into an elitism in which high- and low-artforms (*kitsch*) exist as distinct cultural markers which reinvigorate arcane forms of representation – just ask any MFA. After all, if we accept the idea that there can be no 'good' or 'bad' art, that art is subject to the mere gaze of the spectator, then, frankly, everything and anything advances art. We do not, after all, wish to be reactionaries. As the adage goes, we should *let people enjoy things*; we should purge the hermetic Modernist ghost and widen art's categories. To reiterate: *we do not wish to be reactionaries*.

No one better articulated this position than Joseph Beuys who, in 1973, declared that 'every man is an artist'. While I don't care too much for Beuys' action-oriented approach to art, I think the general sentiment is quite interesting, perhaps an early precursor to today's cultural libertinism. Every man is an artist, every scrap heap a work of art, every act creative:

"Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART. This most modern art discipline [...] will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism."

Wishful thinking. Beuys is the spiritual MFA student *par excellence* paralyzed by the fear of sounding like, well, a reactionary. The 60s and 70s were rife with these lines of thinking, emphasizing the 'democratization of art' – the implications being the banalisation of the aesthetic, in which art and the everyday commingle. Here, the distinctions between high- and low-artforms wither, to such an extent that we are forced to accept the false, egalitarian notion that every human is an artist. The conditions have worsened today, with a cultural logic emphasizing a tolerance of 'enjoyment' at the expense of criticism. Our lenience, our fear of being r-words (reactionaries), is perhaps a gross misinterpretation of the necessity of art. Widening the categories of the aesthetic, being generally permissive, is self-fellating.

Art and the everyday cannot be reconciled. Nor can we proceed as sacerdotal libertines in our belief that all aesthetic creations and valuations are equal. Paglia says as much:

"Art is order. But order is not necessarily just, kind, or beautiful. Order may be arbitrary, harsh, and cruel [...] Particularly in modern times, when high art has been shoved to the periphery of culture, is it evident that art is aggressive and compulsive."

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Yet we arrive at a point where our words begin to anxiously falter. Paglia's emphasis on hierarchy and order owes much to Sade; as far as we are aware Sade is anathema to our liberal graduate tutelage. Simultaneously, the gray waves of excess-as-content, which blur our vision, leave us incapacitated in our attempts at distinguishing good taste from bad. It comes about that we do not wish to embarrassingly reveal ourselves as smug disciples of Spengler, lamenting the suicide of the Faustian spirit. But we owe as much in our discernment, whenever we recoil at the hideous, enjoyable dingueries passed off as 'art' today, that it would be worthwhile to recall Spengler's own vision:

In any Culture, that element is "popular" [...] which a man understands from childhood without having to *master by effort* any really novel method or standpoint–and, generally, that which is immediately and frankly evident to the senses, as against that which is merely hinted at and has to be discovered [...] by the few, and sometimes the very, very few.

On the one hand, it is worthwhile to ask whether enjoyment of excess and discerning criticism can coexist. Yet on the other hand, our incapacities become blatantly obvious in the face of the deluge. As D'annunzio wrote, we are drowning "beneath today's gray democratic flood, which wretchedly submerges so many beautiful and rare things." Can our senses recover, can we martyr ourselves for beauty? Or must we continue living in the wasteland?

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To Linus: That Poor Neglected Fish

For Lucy

These trees outside today stand bare and stripped
of their regal gold and crimson plumes
which though now gone have left a fiery stain
still visible when looking back through the dark

glass bowl of the mind where memory swims in schools
of glittering visions flashing with myriad eyes.
Lucy, whose namesake is the light and aide of poets,
now stares at the watery tank as Linus waves

like a leaf of lapis, a petal of flame.
Azurous, the warbling fins float among
the ordinary foliage of unchanging green
caught in the nets of Lucy's Aegean eyes,

and Moses, before the throne of God, looked down
at Zion's floor to which that chair stood fixed
and thought it worth to note its immortal hue
and Mary's starry mantle wrapped Christ in blue.

The world is deeper than what we can know
and yet by sight we grasp what we can hold:
a fish, a bowl, a girl, the missing leaves.
Attention makes a brief infinity.

Nickolas Krause is a poet from Silver Spring, MD. In his spare time he smokes too many cigarettes, and goes for long walks in the suburban woodlands outside Washington D.C

stop asking the Friends cast to confront structural racism: what's to be gained by fixing the past?: david odyssey

Like many children of the VHS era, I grew up rewinding the Star Wars trilogy box set, its paper casing worn and ripped after endless slumber parties and sick days. And then came 1997. To celebrate the 20th anniversary of Star Wars, George Lucas, the visionary behind the sci-fi juggernaut, released a re-edited version of the saga, this time replacing hand-puppeted alien life-forms with CGI, and changing character beats so that once-dubious antiheroes would play off as morally superior.

I felt violated. Is that what it was like when they made cuts to the Old Testament? What did it mean that an extant artistic statement could be picked up, ripped apart, and rearranged on a whim, long after it had been released into the cultural imagination? Was the original *Star Wars,* which I and my brothers grew up with, lesser, outdated, undone? Could an artist walk into a museum and edit his work, even after it had been displayed permanently?

I had thought that this was a rarity, a blip by a tyrant who couldn't let go. But Lucas was just the beginning. The last decade has seen the rise of YouTube reaction videos and "Everything wrong with" content. And, as a craven press attempts to win over the cheugy tastes and oppressive moralisms of Gen Z, it seems that everything is under review. Television, literature and films made decades (and, in the case of Agatha Christie, a century) ago are not being criticized or explored as elements of an evolving historical canon, but processed under rigid contemporaneous guidelines.

By arming the commoner with the technology to easily film and edit their own work, and even make supercuts of their favorite characters "being chaotic," we have created armies of propaganda engineers, whose perspective has been warped by the time-addling effects of the internet, and digital streaming. The past is flattened into a Wikipedia entry, with no context or space for evolution. Everything can be edited and cleaned up to fit our current understanding of "right." We can now optimize classic literature, make it more "empowering" and less problematic.

This form of cultural cannibalism recurs most punishingly in response to *Friends*, the banal, ubiquitous sitcom which ended its ten-year run in 2004. It seems that every month now, a cast-member or executive producer is asked if the show would be more diverse *if it were made today.* Dazed sitcom actors blink, stutter and attempt to apologize for the show, affirming all the ways that "things have changed" since the '90s.

If it were made today. What is today? Who owns today? Is TV better, or more just? Are audiences wiser, better, more evolved? And would *Friends* even be a hit if made today — all-beige cast or otherwise? Would it air on NBC, or on a streaming network? Still filmed in Burbank? We will never know. That's not how history works. Everything — every life, every event, every piece of

entertainment — is a product of its time. And now, that can no longer be forgiven. Like toddlers who must have the edges cut off their PB&J sandwiches, the new generation of consumer must exert their myopia over space and time, demanding that anything they find offensive be remade to fit their values.

Should context be considered? Perhaps *Friends* succeeded *because* of its anodyne, manna-from-heaven nature; it can be whatever you need it to be, at 6pm when you're on an elliptical machine death-march at Crunch Fitness. *Friends* debuted its overwhelmingly white cast in 1994, and its first seasons ran during what could be considered a boom period for Black TV, which included: *Martin, Living Single, Sister Sister, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, Family Matters*, and soon *The Wayans Brothers, In the House, Moesha* and *The Jamie Foxx Show.* Does that mean that *Friends* got a pass to be so punishingly, blandly white? No. *Friends* can and should be put under a critical lens, but only as an *artifact of its era*, in conversation with the work and politics of the decade that spawned it.

Culture should progress; its standards should change, especially as expanded vision takes firmament in the collective understanding. I recently rewatched *Leon: The Professional*, a favorite from my teen years. Upon seeing an 11 year-old Natalie Portman dressed like a hardcore La Femme Lolita, I felt alright putting the movie aside. I don't need to see it again, I think. But that doesn't mean it's *up for revision*. It's done, *geschribben*, as my Aunt Margie would say. It doesn't belong to me. It doesn't even belong to its creator anymore. It's history now, woven into the tapestry, a part of the mosaic, whether we like it or not.

To accept fate is not to believe that everything happens for a reason, but that everything happens — period. Roald Dahl was a virulent anti-semite. He also told some of the definitive stories of the last two hundred years. For one to be true, another doesn't need to be corrected.

There's nothing we can do but accept the past: its imperfections and its glories, and appreciate that our universe only evolves through cataclysm, combustion and creation; from one piece of art comes another, and then another. You know the rules of every time travel movie: If you take something out of the timeline and try to fix it, you'll break reality. All we have is the future.

I have no doubt that *Friends* will be playing on Jumbotron screens as I toil to my death in the old-age concentration camps of the future. It will air long after the extinction of the human race, "Smelly Cat" echoing through the cosmos for eons to come. But even the most advanced alien intelligences would understand that it is a relic. Something from the past to make us laugh. Nothing more. It's likely that *Friends* may have no profound effect on the development of human consciousness. But that doesn't mean it needs to be augmented, upgraded, improved to be something it never was. Let it be bland. Let it be banal. Just let it be.

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pg. 2, 3, 35, 39

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pg. 22, 23

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pg. 13

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Vitaly Lopez

pg. 14, 16

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Patrick Keohane

pg. 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 21, 31, 34

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